

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 November 1999

Japanese union approves pay cut

Unions covering workers employed by Tokyo's metropolitan government agreed on Wednesday to accept a two-year, 4 percent pay cut, after nightlong closed-door discussions with Shintaro Ishihara, the city's Governor.

The pay reduction is part of the government's plan to cut 150 billion yen from the city's deficit, which is expected to grow to 620 billion yen in 2000.

As well as the 4 percent wage cut, the union has agreed to bonus reductions of 5.7 percent this financial year, and 8.6 percent in 2000. The government wanted to cut bonuses by 10 percent. Management salaries will also be slashed by between 5 and 10 percent.

Following the agreement, union officials cancelled a two-hour strike planned for the same day. Metro workers struck last Friday demanding withdrawal of the government's plan.

Thai bank to eliminate 6,000 jobs

Thailand's biggest commercial lender, the Bangkok Bank will eliminate up to 6,000 jobs or 25 percent of its total staff over the next few years. The bank claims the cut is needed in order to compete with new overseas banks that have entered the domestic market.

The Bangkok Bank currently has a workforce of about 21,000, after shedding 744 jobs in August through an early retirement scheme. A management spokesman said this week that as well as downsizing, the bank planned to cut its 525-strong national branch network. Branches that are not closed outright will have their services drastically restructured.

The bank has non-performing loans equivalent to nearly half its total lending. At the end of the third quarter this year the bank's assets totaled 1.26 trillion baht, 50 billion less than last year.

Tamil teachers strike

Members of the Sri Lankan Ceylon Tamil Teachers Union (CTTU) will strike next year over nine demands, including the withdrawal of textbooks currently used by Tamil students. The teachers insist that the current texts contain serious errors and new books must be prepared with the help of Tamil scholars.

Although education authorities have promised to address teachers' concerns during meetings with the union, nothing has happened so far. The union has recommended that teachers send sick notes and boycott classes on January 7.

Explosion injures worker

A worker at ICC, a concrete plant in Piliyandala in suburbs of Colombo, Sri Lanka was seriously injured this week when a fire

extinguisher exploded at the factory. The explosion took place while the worker was being trained to handle fire-prevention equipment.

Workers have accused the company that supplied the extinguisher of negligence. The injured worker was rushed to hospital and is now in intensive care.

Transport workers strike at Prima flour factory

Lorry drivers and helpers at Prima flour factory in Trincomalee, a major city in the war-torn Eastern Province, struck last Friday in protest over the Sri Lankan army's forcible acquisition of their lorries. Some of the lorries were seized from the factory after hours.

The drivers have complained to the Sri Lankan Food Department over the seizures and demanded immediate return of the lorries. A spokesman for the drivers said: "If the army wants to take over lorries it must be done legally." The army's action has prevented the transport of flour to Colombo, and other areas of the country.

Bangladesh jute workers fight layoffs

Jute mill workers protesting against lay-offs and the non-payment of wages have barricaded the main highway linking Chittagong port to Dhaka, the Bangladesh capital.

Thousands of vehicles carrying goods and passengers were stranded at Barabkunda, 18 miles from Chittagong, after 5,000 workers from two mills raised barricades on Monday.

Two government ministers have flown to Chittagong in an attempt to arrange negotiations between trade union leaders and the jute mill owners.

The owners shut the mills early this year claiming that they could not be run profitably. They refused to pay wages and other entitlements owed to workers worth more than 260 million taka (\$US5.25 million).

Army moved into Bangladesh port

Cargo handlers at Bangladesh's Mongla port ended an eight-day strike on Wednesday after the government declared the action illegal and moved troops in to break the strike.

The indefinite strike by more than 2,000 casual workers paralysed the port and stranded 29 ships, including six carrying food-grains. The workers were demanding permanent jobs.

Mongla, which handles 20 percent of the country's foreign trade, remains under army control.

Parking officers impose bans

New South Wales parking patrol officers this week placed an indefinite ban on imposing fines for a range of parking and traffic offenses. The state's 260 officers are concerned over the push by

local councils to take control of parking regulation enforcement. If the council's bid is successful it could cost jobs and further reduce working conditions.

The parking officers are also demanding that the state government recruit new employees to ease workloads. Parking officer jobs have been cut from 318 to 260.

The bans mean that only vehicles parked in no stopping zones, clearways, bus zones and disabled parking spaces will attract fines. Officers will also refuse to remove cars that are illegally parked and causing obstruction at street parades, festivals and other special events.

Local councils are keen to take over the service because it raises over \$60 million a year.

Australian power workers threaten strike

Energy unions warned yesterday that more than 500 power workers at Yallourn Energy in the La Trobe Valley, Victoria, could strike before Christmas if the State's biggest power company changes working hours and slashes pay rates. The warning was issued on Tuesday, following a meeting of more than 40 union delegates at the Victorian Trades Hall.

The company wants to force workers on to a minimal award, which will reduce wage rates, and cut shift and penalty allowances.

A Yallourn Energy spokesman said that the company would only commit itself to paying the current rates of pay for the first six months after the present agreement ends. He said management would ask the Industrial Relation Commission to terminate the current work-place agreement next week.

The company is demanding workplace changes and increase productivity in order to finance a \$500 million investment in a new coal field and upgrade its Yallourn W power station. It claims that workers were offered pay rises of up to 22.5 per cent over three years and a guarantee against compulsory redundancies for the life of the new agreement. Workers have said that the pay increase was no more than 12 percent and would not compensate the loss of conditions.

Union officials are concerned that a power strike could embarrass the newly elected State Labor government. A leading official told the media he was concerned that the company's actions could "cause an overreaction of industrial dispute".

"If Yallourn provokes an industrial dispute before Christmas with lock-outs, then we will have a really messy situation that the new Bracks government doesn't need."

Teachers rally to defend conditions

Over 25,000 striking teachers held a noisy demonstration outside the New South Wales parliament on Thursday in support of an annual 7.5 percent pay rise over the next four years and in opposition to the government's plan to undermine working conditions.

Teachers are furious that the government has only offered a 2 per cent per year wage increase and is demanding of extensive changes in working conditions. This includes a radical increase in working hours and an extension of the number of days worked in a year.

When one speaker recalled a comment made by the Education Minister John Aquilina earlier this year that teachers would

"lynch" him if he offered a pay rise that didn't match the inflation rate, the crowd chanted "get the rope!" and "lynch him".

The demonstrators burnt copies of the government's offer and flung thousands more into the parliament building's forecourt. The rally is the biggest teachers' demonstration for almost a decade when thousands turned protested against education cuts by the former state Liberal government.

A meeting of the 300-member council of the NSW Teachers Federation will consider further strike action. This includes two-hour work stoppages on five mornings over the next two weeks.

Train controllers extend strike

Train controllers in Newcastle and Orange, New South Wales voted to extend their one-day strike by another 24 hours after discussions between the Australian Services Union (ASU) and State Rail in the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) failed to resolve a pay dispute.

The controllers went on strike on Thursday demanding State Rail pay an 8 per cent wage rise awarded by the IRC earlier this year. The strike has been extended in defiance of an IRC recommendation that the workers accept a seven-day cooling off period.

All trains in the northern part of the State, including freight, Countrylink passenger trains and Newcastle suburban trains, were seriously disrupted by the stoppages.

Striking ambulance drives

This week, 3,500 ambulance officers, members of the New South Wales Health and Research Employees Association, threatened a 24-hour statewide strike on December 1, if the government continues with its plan to reduce entitlements.

The Health Department wants to eliminate the payment of expenses that arise when ambulance drivers are transferred to another part of the state. This includes out-of-pocket expenses, such as removalist fees and government stamp-duty on house purchases. A spokesman for the officers said that the changes were being imposed without any consultation.

Flight crews plan strike for pay increase

Air New Zealand management applied to the New Zealand Employment Court to stop industrial action next week by 1,200 international flight attendants. The attendants plan to strike in Auckland next Tuesday and in Los Angeles, the airlines other major hub, on Wednesday and Friday.

The airline will challenge the legality of the Los Angeles action based on legal advice provided by American attorneys who contend that union members who went on strike would be in violation of their entry permits into the United States.

The dispute arose after negotiations failed to settle disagreements between the Flight Attendants Association and the company over crewing levels on aircraft during rest periods, and plans by the airline to relocate 288 attendants from Auckland to Sydney and London.



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